COMMENTARY

Improving Equity for Women in Pharmacy Academia

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Previous studies have identified that gender inequities exist in pharmacy academia. The inequities that women in academic pharmacy face are lower job satisfaction, ability to achieve higher ranks in faculty and administration, and salary. To date, considerations of why these inequities exist and what measures can be taken to address them remain relatively unexplored. This commentary explores possible causes of gender inequities in pharmacy academia and potential solutions to improve equity between women and men. Potential causes discussed include underlying sexism still present in society and academia today, promotion and tenure and the tenure clock, the concept of overwork, and the role of motherhood on female faculty. Suggestions to help improve gender inequity include both structural and cultural changes to the pharmacy academic environment.

Keywords: gender, inequity, academia

INTRODUCTION

When analyzing women in pharmacy it is clear that women will continue to be a large portion of the pharmacy workforce. In 2019, 64% of the pharmacy students enrolled in colleges of pharmacy were females. A study by Chisolm-Burns et al identified that between 1989 and 2009 the number of females in pharmacy academia more than doubled. Similarly, in the pharmacy workforce the percentage of women practicing pharmacy increased to 65% in 2019 from 46% in 2009. Despite the increase of women in pharmacy, an analysis by Draugalis in pharmacy academia found gender differences in achievement of rank, leadership positions, and salary indicating specific areas where women may be at a disadvantage. The percentage of women in the profession of pharmacy has been increasing but concerning evidence shows that women are still dealing with significant inequity in pharmacy work settings including academia.

Gender disparities have been reported in the pharmacy literature. In 2018, Lindfelt found that women in pharmacy academia were less satisfied with their work life balance than men and were more likely to consider leaving the academic environment. In 2014, Draugalis found that gender disparities exist in pharmacy academia in achievement of rank, leadership positions, and salary. A survey of pharmacy faculty in 2020 showed that women were less likely to be satisfied with their work life balance and their academic position, and were more likely to hold a lower academic rank than men. Recently, an analysis showed that while the number of female CEO deans has increased over time, the percentage of female deans in relation to the number of pharmacy schools has declined.

The difference between gender equality and gender equity should be considered. Equality is a principle of fairness and involves a gender neutral perspective when considering work structures and culture. Equity goes beyond equality by viewing work structures and culture through a gendered lens when identifying and addressing gender differences. This commentary explores reasons for lack of gender equity in pharmacy academia and suggests solutions to foster a more equitable environment.

Potential Causes

Nelson Mandela said, “Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all kinds of oppression.” The simplest and least palatable explanation for the continuing gender inequity in pharmacy academia is that similar to how sexism is still present in society today, that sexism in still present pharmacy education. While it may be difficult to determine the cumulative magnitude of this effect or to discern the role of explicit versus implicit gender bias, it is safe to assume that individual and sociological gender bias is a contributing factor to our current gender inequity.
Beyond this explanation, however, multiple additional mechanisms both structural and cultural have been identified as causes of gender inequity.

One potential cause is the career effects of motherhood on female academicians. In 2021, Morgan found that the role of parenthood affects women in academics more than men because women still shoulder the larger burden of child care in society today and is sometimes called “baby tax”.10,11 Having children has been shown to hinder a woman’s career and earning potential while increasing a man’s earning potential since it was found that having children is associated with higher salaries for men.12 The time women need for maternity leave or childcare creates time segments when they cannot be productive in the academic setting. These gaps often occur early in their careers when women are at the lowest academic rank and striving towards promotion and tenure. Therefore, women who have children in their academic careers may have less time to achieve promotion and tenure than their male counterparts. This slower career advancement could also lead to wage disparities over time. These time gaps could partially explain the gender differences seen in higher faculty and administrative ranks and salaries.

Another cause could be the workload distribution of research, teaching, and service. Women in academia have been shown to have a larger service portion of their workload than men, leaving them with disproportionately less effort for scholarship.13 It is unclear whether women are assigned more service efforts or if there is gendered pressure to volunteer for these roles.

Despite the reason, a larger than average service portion could prevent women’s abilities to engage in research activity to the same extent as their male colleagues and therefore negatively affect them in the promotion and tenure process.

Unclear promotion processes and expectations for part time faculty could be another barrier. Evidence supports that female faculty may be more likely to seek part-time positions than their male counterparts. Fjortoft and colleagues studied the pros and cons of part-time faculty from department chairs’ perspectives, and reported that females comprised the majority of faculty asking to reduce their full-time positions to part-time and that the most noted reason was family.14 Department chairs also noted that faculty in part time positions often did full time work despite receiving part time pay and that part time faculty were marginalized or viewed as second class citizens.14 If women in part time academic positions are not coached and given clear guidance on how to grow their careers and progress toward promotion and tenure then they may remain at lower ranks of faculty.

Work hours could also contribute to creating an unequal environment for female pharmacy academics. Overwork, defined as working fifty or more hours a week, has been shown to be a contributing factor in the gender pay gap and gender disparities in the workplace.12. Overwork is more common in professional and managerial occupations where long work hours become standard and contribute to the image of the “ideal worker”.15. As described by Lupu in 2021, academia is an environment that promotes long hours and fosters the expectation that faculty need to be available constantly. The academic culture views the ideal worker as someone who gives priority to work over other outside responsibilities.16 Therefore, the way in which the concepts of overwork and the ideal worker are expected in pharmacy academia could create inequity for women who still shoulder more family and outside responsibilities and therefore may not be able to work as many hours.16

Potential Solutions

The first step towards reducing any form of inequity is improved awareness of the problem. Ignorance and denial are persistent barriers to meaningful change in any system–including pharmacy academia. Among those who are able and willing, we propose two main areas to operationalize efforts to improve equity. The first is institutional and academic structure which includes the academic infrastructure, resources available to faculty, and the policies and procedures in place at the university and academic unit. The second area is academic culture; a discussion of ways that culture fosters gender inequity and could be changed to foster a more equitable environment is presented. In addition to structural and cultural changes there is a need for advocacy, mentorship, and guidance from senior pharmacy faculty and administrators in positions of power. Given that men still hold more of the highest positions in academic pharmacy, this issue requires as much of a commitment from men as it does from women.

A structural strategy that has been recommended to help women in academia is to increase access to affordable child care17. With women bearing the larger burden of childcare, access to affordable childcare is necessary in order for women to balance their careers while caring for children or other loved ones. While some academic institutions provide childcare options, these options are often not large enough to meet the needs of all of their employees. While there is no specific individual who can address this issue, academic leaders and faculty could advocate for increasing access to childcare with higher education upper administration.
Another structural solution is for department chairs and pharmacy administration to review the tenure clock and workload distributions and the coaching and guidance for women to take into account the extra time needed to achieve the requirements of promotion and tenure. This could be accomplished by setting a standard time addition to the tenure clock to account for each maternity leave and recovery or part-time position without the faculty member having to request the adjustment. In addition, adjusting productivity expectations and providing coaching and clear guidance on how to grow their careers toward promotion and tenure would also be beneficial to women who chose to have children.

Other structural areas that could be reviewed by academic administrators and department chairs for gender disparities in schools of pharmacy are hiring practices, salaries and benefits, and workload assignments. Given the gender inequity in pharmacy academia in terms of faculty and administrative ranks, consideration should be given to gender similar to other areas of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the hiring process of senior faculty and administrators. Additionally, a regular review of internal data on salaries and benefits for males and females at the same rank could identify and correct any gender-related differences. Lastly, an analysis of workload allocation for women and corresponding adjustments could ensure that women are not shoulder more service responsibilities than their male counterparts.

Building an infrastructure to support DEI and to include gender as part of DEI could be another helpful structural change. For example creating a standing committee to review diversity, equity, and inclusion practiced at the school and assigning committee charges that review gender equity could assist in the identification of disparities and creation of solutions at the school level. In addition, mentorship and sponsorship of women is an important area to address to promote gender equity. Therefore pharmacy school leadership should look for ways to operationalize mentorship and sponsorship at their schools. Doing so could help address the current gender differences seen between men and women in terms of pharmacy faculty and administrative ranks.

Historically, the culture of academic pharmacy was built around what was considered normal for male competence and success. Academic cultural norms experienced today began before women were commonly in the workplace and well before women began seeking advanced degrees and embarking on academic careers. Therefore, the cultural norms of academia such as workload expectations, the tenure clock (as previously mentioned), and the characteristics of the ideal academic employee must be critically evaluated for their role in creating gender inequity. As the cultural norms are evaluated it is important for individuals to start challenging areas that warrant change. In addition to tangible areas that can be changed, attention should also be given to establishing a common understanding of gender inequity and fostering common standards and allyship around this issue.

An area that bridges both academic structure and culture is the concept of overwork. Overwork and the expectation that faculty should overwork has become a part of the academic culture. Both the culture of overwork and the data indicating that women have lower work satisfaction due to less work-life balance indicates that overwork must be addressed if pharmacy academia wants to create a more gender equitable environment. In regards to structure, pharmacy school administrators and department chairs should review faculty expectations to ensure they are fair and promote work-life balance. Additionally, pharmacy school leadership could critically review the culture of their units for ways in which overwork might be inherent to the culture. Another concept related to gender equity is well-being, which has received a lot of attention in the last few years with some recommendations being put forth to enhance well-being and reduce burnout for all faculty. Many of the suggestions that promote well-being are similar to those that can also enhance equity.

CONCLUSION

Gender inequity is still present in pharmacy academia. As discussed in this commentary, there are numerous potential causes and solutions to explore in order to address this issue. To date, the discussion of gender inequities has focused on reporting the problem. It is time for pharmacy academia to move from discussion to action.

REFERENCES